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ABSTRACT

This study examined what parents viewed as necessary for creating effective school leaders. The research used focus groups in order to obtain qualitative information that could guide program development. The results confirm the notion that parents want to participate in the democratic revitalization of society through interaction with school leaders. Parents are interested in developing and supporting principals, with the ultimate aim of creating more vibrant and exciting schools for their children. Parent involvement is frequently cited as a necessary component to effective school reform, and parents are increasingly demanding a voice in the education process. It is suggested that schools benefit when parents are involved in decision making. Parents are the primary clientele of schools, are more likely to support school decisions when their voices are heard, and bring a different perspective to school leadership. Appended is the "Focus Group Interview Guide." (Contains four pages of references.) (RJM)

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A Study of Parental Views Regarding the Characteristics of an Effective School Leader

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Introduction

Educational administration, as a profession, is undergoing a transformation. Historically, school leadership has developed through a practical, hands-on approach. University preparation consisted of a 'collection of courses' students would take at their convenience. Articulation of the curriculum was unheard of, and planned, thoughtful course-taking rarely occurred. Today, efforts are underway to improve the fragmented approach to principal preparation. Increasingly, people are recognizing that if educational leaders are to better serve schools and students in our rapidly changing society, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possess must be different than those reflected in traditional educational administration curricula. Successful school reform will not take place apart from a better understanding of school leadership. Thus, the changing nature of our society directly challenges the leadership models currently in place in our state's schools (Daresh & Barnett, 1993).

"The principalship continues to be one of the most durable and critical positions in the administration of American schools. Although there are variations in the size and location of schools and school systems, differences in the personalities and experiential backgrounds of principals, and variations in the socioeconomic circumstances of children, youth and parents served, the building principal remains the administrator most closely associated with the daily

operations of the school, with the implementation of curriculum, and its association with the community" (Erickson & Heller, 1979).

Society today is beginning to acknowledge school leadership as a complex, multi-task and multi-faceted journey. In a profession which loses fifty percent of its teachers within the first five years of professional experience, school administration is not much stronger. The path by which school leaders prepare for the principalship is often fragmented and uncertain. Entry is usually through self-selection, and more often than not, pre-service training is dominated by students who "want to get the certificate, just in case...". Educational administration programs generally accept students, as long as they "have a pulse, possess sufficient financial resources, a completed baccalaureate degree, and the ability to complete the paper requirements for entrance. This 'batch feed' approach to student selection appears inspired by the plaque on the Statue of Liberty which invited the 'huddled masses' to our shores" (Daresh, 1997). Universities seem to often permit open admissions for masters level candidates while priding themselves on the rigor of the doctoral student selection process. Because most individuals who step into the principalship will never attain a doctorate in education, the focus should be on the principal preparation process at the masters level certification program, for that is where the largest impact on school improvement will come from (Daresh, 1997).

Rarely do school districts study their "administrator pool" with an eye toward current and future needs for the principalship. Long-range strategies for

preparing talented, potential administrators are usually unheard of. And yet, the demands placed on practicing principals have never been greater. Current research continually points out that the behavior of educational leaders is one of the most critical factors supporting high quality school programs (Daresh, 1991). With pressure to improve schools building from all segments of society, it appears obvious that all stakeholders have a vested interest in the preparation of effective school leaders (Erlandson, 1997), and their input would add to the current knowledge base underpinning effective educational administrative practice.

The Texas State Board of Education adopted the strategy of "Learner-Centered Schools for Texas" in 1994. The document delineates critical proficiencies for counselors, teachers, and administrators. The proficiencies for administrators are grouped into six categories: (1) Learner-centered leadership; (2) Learner-centered climate; (3) Learner-centered curriculum and instruction; (4) Learner-centered professional development; (5) Equity in excellence for all learners, and (6) Learner-centered communication (Learner Centered Proficiencies, 1995). The sixth proficiency, learner-centered communication is summarized by the following: The administrator effectively communicates the learning community's vision as well as its policies and successes in interaction with staff, students, *parents*, community members, and the media. It is interesting to note that while subchapter J of the Texas Education Code delineates requirements for masters/certification programs in educational leadership throughout the state, it calls for the broad involvement of stakeholders in program development; however,

those stakeholders are specified only as 'experts' in the field. It does not mandate that parents and others outside the school be consulted as to their preferences and perceptions regarding the preparation of school leaders. Since school leaders must develop proficiency in coalition building, this researcher believes it only prudent to seek the thoughts and concerns of community groups when developing leadership programs--the ultimate aim being the successful reform of schools.

Review of the Literature

Inclusion of Non-Traditional Stakeholders

Much of the literature regarding stakeholder participation in leadership development focuses on the "experts" in the field. Daresh and Barnett (1993) point out that positive relationships must be cultivated outside the campus, as well as within the university setting. Important outside agencies include local school districts, the state administrators' association, the state department of education, the state legislature and governor's office, and private corporations. Erlandson (1997) lists five stakeholder groups traditionally involved in the preparation of school leaders: (1) the state, including the legislature, the State Board of Education, the Texas Education Agency, and the State Board for Educator Certification; (2) the local schools and school districts; (3) the universities, which historically have provided pre-service educational administrative training; (4) the regional service centers; and (5) the professional associations which take primary responsibility for in-service, continuing professional needs of practicing educators. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (1992) also refers to

these "expert" stakeholders when planning principal preparation reform. While these are legitimate stakeholders to involve in the consultation process, this researcher asserts that a missing component, parents of public schoolchildren, can add valuable insight to the principal preparation process.

Cambron-McCabe (1993) identifies four assumptions which underlie the development of leadership programs. The fourth states that leadership is the process of sharing power with others--teachers, students, *parents*, and community--for democratic purposes. The development of collaborative structures which reframe the roles of administrators and promote a community of learners are essential in the reformation of educational practice. However, Cambron-McCabe, with Quantz and Dantley (1991) argue that organizations must exercise caution to avoid using democratic participatory processes as a means only. Democracy implies both the process and goal, and so it is critical that the ends also reflect the democratic process. In other words, if we invite stakeholders to participate in the planning of school leadership preparation, we must also incorporate their valid concerns into the final product. It is not enough to listen and then discard what stakeholders produce, under the guise of "they're not professional educators and we know better."

"Today's parents increasingly desire a voice in the educational process. Legislators and state and local school officials need to view parents as legitimate partners in their children's education. In order to guarantee parents' input, states must lead the way in requiring meaningful parent involvement" (Nardine & Morris,

1991). Unfortunately, it appears that much of the existing state legislation amounts to little more than lip service paid to the widely accepted idea that parents play a critical role in a child's education (1991). Schools must move beyond the concept of 'bake sale' parent involvement.

Current Efforts to Redefine Parental Involvement

Don Davies (1991) notes that school-based decision making has been a disappointment with regard to educational reform efforts, and will continue to be a disappointment unless educators take a collaborative approach to governance. D'Angelo & Adler (1991) acknowledge that natural barriers always exist when people try to communicate with one another. Schools are no exception. These barriers must be broken if schools are to effectively include parents meaningfully in their children's education. Parental involvement, as it is traditionally defined, is not powerful enough to make an impact on the practices of urban schools. Davies asserts that traditional parental involvement practices actually divert attention from the fact that schools and families have "inadequately promoted the academic and social success of some children. But, if its definitions and practices are redefined, parent involvement can make a powerful contribution to efforts to reform urban schools and to achieve our national aim of providing a successful school experience for all children of all backgrounds and circumstances" (1991).

Redefining parent involvement and linking it to school reform is the focus of numerous researchers. James Comer, a Yale University psychiatrist, believes that for schools serving poor and minority children to become effective, the

parents must be drawn in to play a more significant role in all aspects of school life, including management and governance--two areas normally controlled by principals. Henry Levin's accelerated schools model, first begun in San Francisco, emphasizes numerous factors, including the utilization of parents as resource people and decision makers. Joyce Epstein has developed a model of school and family connections, delineating five types of parental involvement: (1) the basic obligations of parenting, responsibility for children's health, safety, supervision, discipline, guidance, and learning at home; (2) the basic obligation of schools to communicate with the home; (3) the involvement of parents at school as volunteers, supporters, and spectators at school events and student performances; (4) parent involvement in learning activities at home; and (5) parent involvement in school decision making, governance, and advocacy (Epstein, 1987).

Parent involvement is cited as a necessary component to effective school reform. It is noted as a factor in inner-city Catholic school achievement (Bauch, 1987), and could mitigate the negative effects of difficult socioeconomic characteristics. Research on families supports the notion that those of varied socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups want to learn more about how to help their children learn and succeed. "What families do (rather than what demographic groups they fall into) affects children's learning" (Davies, 1991). In addition, collaborative support from numerous groups strengthens the ability of schools serving poor, minority students to succeed. A study of over fifty Texas schools identified as heavily impacted by poverty, and yet successful academically, revealed

that administrators felt they were supported by central office personnel and their communities. In such schools, improved achievement was expected as everyone (including teachers, support staff, *parents*, central-office staff and community leaders) played a part in actualizing the school's mission (Lein, Johnson, Ragland, 1997). A study conducted by Dornbusch and Ritter (1988) showed that the lowest level of family involvement is among parents of average achievers, minority parents, and in step families. Yet Lein, Johnson, and Ragland found that these parents can be a rich resource for academic success when tapped for their support. These findings support the notion that failure to change parent-school relations will perpetuate inequality, an unacceptable position.

Epstein (1991) notes, "There are still vast gaps in our knowledge that can only be filled by rigorous research and evaluation of particular types of school/family connections in support of children's learning. We need both formal studies and clear documentation of existing practices."

Proposed Standards for Principal Preparation Programs

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders (1996) identifies six standards for the preparation proficiency of school leaders. The fourth standard states that, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. The administrator should believe in, value, and be committed to the following:

- schools operating as an integral part of the larger community
- collaboration and communication with families
- involvement of families and other stakeholders in school decision-making processes
- the proposition that diversity enriches the school
- families as partners in the education of their children
- the proposition that families have the best interests of their children in mind
- resources of the family and community needing to be brought to bear on the education of students
- an informed public (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

There are several reasons why schools benefit when parents are involved in decision making. First, parents are the primary clientele of schools. Research in success in business shows that those businesses which put clients first are the businesses which tend to succeed. Additionally, parents are more likely to support school decisions when their voice has been heard. Thirdly, parents bring a different perspective to school leadership, by virtue of their own experiential base (Mass. State Dept. Of Education, Parent School Collaboration: A Compendium of Strategies for Parent Involvement, 1990). Bolman and Deal (1997) point out the improvement of the decision-making process when leaders are able to examine issues from various 'frames.' Parents certainly bring an additional "frame" or "way of seeing things" to the table. Schools cannot create the needed reforms alone. The process is so complex and multi-faceted that success will come only with the

collaboration of stakeholders most affected by public education. Thus, increased improvement will emerge as families and communities partner with schools to promote successful students (Epstein, 1992).

Problem Statement

The University of Texas at El Paso's department of Educational Leadership and Foundations is reviewing its educational administration masters degree program, assessing courses and internship experiences to determine how they fit with the six goals of the Learner-Centered Proficiencies adopted by the State Board of Education in 1994. The goal is to align the program with the Learner-Centered Proficiencies, thus making the learning process a more meaningful, thoughtful, and reflective educational experience for future school leaders. The University recognizes the importance of interacting with those stakeholders who are concerned with public education, and therefore this research project's focus is to obtain data from one important group of stakeholders, the parents of El Paso public schoolchildren.

Methodology

As the University of Texas at El Paso's department of Educational Leadership and Foundations strives to redesign its masters degree/certification for the principalship, the decision was made to seek input from key stakeholders in public education. Those groups include practicing administrators, teachers, the business community, school boards, students, and parents. This study focuses on the views of parents, as their children are the reason for the schools' existence. The

investigation employed focus groups to obtain qualitative information which could guide the program development process.

Qualitative Research and Theoretical Paradigms

Qualitative research methods are always subject to attacks that they produce "soft" data. Inherent in scientific research is the attitude that numbers convey a sense of precision and accuracy, even if the measurements which produced those numbers were relatively unreliable, invalid, and meaningless. The key is to be *pro-meaningfulness*, and thus the research methodology selected must provide meaningful data to answer the research question. The focus group can be conducted as a semi-structured interview session in which participants can speak freely, providing answers to open-ended questions which are guided by the moderator. Qualitative methods, in this case, provide the type of data which would help inform the masters degree/certification program development process. In retrospect, "[Q]ualitative methods are not weaker or softer than quantitative approaches--qualitative methods are different" (Patton, 1990).

The paradigm informing the methodology used in this study can best be described as constructivism. When working with varied stakeholder groups in public education, researchers must recognize that reality is understood by different people in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions which are socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individual person or groups making the constructions. "Constructions are not more or less "true," in any absolute sense, but simply more

or less informed and/or sophisticated" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The hermeneutical and dialectical methodology underlying the constructivist paradigm permits the "voice" of the parents to be heard through interaction with the investigator and other respondents. The group sessions provide a forum which produce data that are open to new interpretations as information and sophistication regarding the principal preparation process proceeds (1994).

Theoretical Assumptions Underlying Focus Group Research

Focus groups came into vogue after World War II. Originally used mostly for marketing research, they were referred to as the *focussed interview*. The term *focus* refers to the fact that the interview is limited to a small number of issues. Their use should be consistent with the objectives and purpose of the research, which is often exploratory in nature. Frequently, the data is used to inform survey design, which is then followed by other types of research yielding large amounts of quantifiable data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The group interview is essentially a qualitative technique. The moderator interacts with the respondents in either a structured or very unstructured manner, depending on the researcher's purpose. The group interview has advantages and problems, both of which the researcher must be aware. Advantages consist of the following: focus group sessions are relatively inexpensive, flexible, stimulating to respondents, aid recall through the group process, and are cumulative and elaborative over and above the individual responses. Problems may emerge if the group culture interferes with individual expression, the group is dominated by one

person, or "groupthink" becomes evident. Additionally, the moderator must be skilled in group dynamics since s/he "...must simultaneously worry about the script of questions and be sensitive to the evolving patterns of group interaction" (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Kreuger (1993) discusses ways to enhance quality control in focus group interviewing. The acceptance and widespread use of focus groups has led to a variety of appropriate uses, but also some misapplications. Differences in the quality of these groups is more noticeable today than a decade ago, because their popularity has greatly increased their use among researchers. No methodology escapes the erosion of quality that occurs when many people adopt its use. Qualitative methodologies, of which focus groups are a part, are particularly susceptible to abuse because they involve people--people who must make judgments about the nature of the questions to be asked, subjects to be studied, and the analysis to be conducted. Kreuger, therefore, offers a list of ten factors which can influence the quality of focus group interviews: (1) clarity of purpose; (2) appropriate environment; (3) sufficient resources; (4) appropriate participants; (5) skillful moderator; (6) effective questions; (7) careful data handling; (8) systematic and verifiable analysis; (9) appropriate presentation; and (10) honoring the participant, client, and method. Appropriate attention to each of these factors greatly improves the probability of obtaining quality data from a focus group session.

Preparation for the Focus Group Process

Three focus groups were conducted in order to solicit input from the stakeholder group (parents) regarding their views of "What makes an effective school leader?" One elementary school, one middle school, and one high school within the El Paso Independent School District were identified as appropriate sites for data collection. One school was in south El Paso, representing a population of almost 100% low socioeconomic, Hispanic parents. Another, located on El Paso's westside, was composed of mostly high socioeconomic parents of white students. The third group consisted of middle class, working parents from the northeast portion of the city. This third group was also the most diverse ethnically, with African-Americans, Hispanics, and white parents well represented.

It was surmised by the researcher that the diverse ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels of participating parents might result in dissimilar perspectives regarding the valued characteristics of effective school leaders. It is not unusual for divergent stakeholders to disagree about program purposes, goals, and means for attaining these goals (Patton, 1990, p. 470). If similar perspectives (theories) held by the parents at the three schools emerged, triangulation through the use of the three varied groups would help guard against the accusation that the study's finding are simply an artifact of speaking to like stakeholders (Patton, 1990, p. 470).

The interview guide (see Appendix) for the moderator was developed using the six Learner-Centered Proficiencies adopted by the Texas State Board of

Education in 1994. Questions were structured to provide for a semi-structured interview session, such that respondents had freedom to wander with their answers, provided they stayed within the structural framework of the broadly based queries. This procedure allowed for the emergence of information which might not have come forth had the questions been more direct, and yet the discussion remained focused in the area of interest to the researcher.

Approval of the project by the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects and its Institutional Review Board was required, due to the fact that human subjects were involved, and because the focus group sessions were audio-taped. All participants were provided complete explanations of the project, informed consent letters, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix). In addition, approval was also obtained from the Office of Research and Evaluation of the El Paso Independent School District, the district in which the parents' children attend school.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling enlisted the participants the project required. Purposive sampling is used to select subjects based on predetermined criteria such that the selected subjects can contribute to the research study (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Recruiting the help of school officials, appropriate lists were obtained from which to select possible parent participants. Criteria for selection included a broad range of socioeconomic levels and ethnicities, parents who always volunteer at school and those who "never darken the school doors," and

parents of "successful" children, as well as those whose children struggle with academics and/or discipline issues. Although many parents do not participate in school functions, the project was explained in such a way that most parents telephoned responded positively.

Twice as many parents were invited as were expected to show up the day of the scheduled group session. This number seemed to work well, as almost exactly one-half of the invited parents actually attended. Nine to ten parents participated in each session, with the selection criteria accurately accounted for; however, two of the sessions were more homogeneous in nature due to the demographics of the schools. The southside session was attended entirely by Hispanic parents who spoke only Spanish. The westside session consisted almost entirely of high socioeconomic white parents, although one Spanish speaking, low socioeconomic couple participated. The third group, the northeast session, consisted of a broad mix of parents; all were of varied middle class socioeconomic levels, two were African-American, two were white, and the remainder were Hispanic. One couple, fairly recent immigrants to the United States, spoke only Spanish. Taken together, the three groups provided the perspectives of the varied parent stakeholder groups from which the researcher wished to elicit information.

An interpreter accompanied the researcher for each focus group session in order to translate for those parents more comfortable expressing themselves in Spanish. Simultaneous translations occurred at the westside and northeast sessions. The southside session was conducted entirely in Spanish and an English translation

was provided for the researcher--the only person in the room who did not speak Spanish.

Transcription of all the audiotapes was accomplished shortly after the sessions ended. Although the sound quality of the tapes was only moderately good (due to the simultaneous Spanish translations occurring throughout the sessions), transcriptions quite accurately reflect the content of the sessions. The Spanish tape was first transcribed and then translated into English. Concerns arise whenever translations are provided for research due to the fact that some meaning might be lost through the translation process. In this study, the session translation and the tape translation were carried out by two different people; their resulting translations closely matched one another.

The tactic employed for data analysis was that of noting patterns and themes. Data were clustered conceptually according to the domains, and further analyzed as thematic patterns emerged (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Counting the number of times parents made remarks about each topic helped to determine which domains seemed of most importance to them. The emergent design precluded the prediction of findings until the investigation was well underway (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Findings

Interestingly, the thoughts, concerns, and passions of the parents from the three different focus groups (three socioeconomic levels and varied ethnicities) were fairly consistent. Purposely designing the focus groups to obtain information

from a variety of parental stakeholders did not result in different emphases within the six Learner-Centered Proficiencies. Parents were secure in their confidentiality and anonymity as they spoke openly and honestly; but more than that, it seemed apparent that they very much wanted their voices heard. More than one parent in different groups remarked that they wanted to meet again, that they were more than willing to visit pre-service principals in their university classes, and that they gladly were giving of their time and would do so again, as long as something worthwhile would come of it.

Parents spoke more often of *Climate* than any of the other domains. The low socioeconomic, Spanish-speaking Hispanic parents were almost passionate in their efforts to make it understood that first and foremost, they want their children to learn in a caring, loving environment. The word "love" was used repeatedly by this group of stakeholders. Secondly, the next most popular topic was *Leadership*. Parents from the westside and northeast schools articulated leadership issues clearly, but southside parents also made references to it. *Communication* was the third most discussed domain, with an emphasis on principals listening to students and parents, and also being visible in the school. *Equity* issues were fourth, which seems somewhat surprising in a city where such a large portion of the population is minority and living at lower than average socioeconomic levels. The equity issues which arose had nothing to do with the equitable distribution of resources within schools. Rather, the discussion arose through reference to racial tensions at a particular high school (not the high school used in this study) in the city.

Professional Development issues were the fifth most commonly discussed topic, with the *Curriculum & Instruction* domain the least mentioned of the six. Each of the six domains is discussed at length below.

Climate

Parents want a campus which feels inviting for their children and also themselves, when they choose to visit. They insist on an pleasant, warm atmosphere, such that their children can focus on learning apart from unnecessary distractions. Repeatedly, they referred to the ideal principal as one who would get out of the office, interact, and listen to people (students, teachers, and parents). Principal preparation programs typically prepare principals to handle the technical aspects of their work, with little emphasis given to the human, interpersonal skills component; however, it seems apparent that parental stakeholders see the human factor as an additional, critical ingredient necessary for successful schools.

Several of the parents noted that they didn't know who the principal of their school was. Although they attended open houses and made an effort to be at the school, they felt their principal was unavailable.

> "We want principals who are accessible. We don't know who the principal is here at this campus. We always come to the school to open houses to meet teachers...but the principal is never around" (C 107-109 A).
>
> "I've never even seen our principal. If you put him/her in a line-up, I wouldn't know who it was! How can you get to know them [principals] if they don't make themselves available?" (L 44-45 A).

Parents want principals who are confident and sure of themselves, who will immediately set the boundaries, so that children and teachers know what the rules and regulations are from the first day. When children know what's expected of

them, they "settle in" and a more peaceful atmosphere is established. When teachers understand "how things are done around here," they too are more capable of effectively practicing their profession--teaching students.

"[Good principals are] very demanding, and those demands cause kids to rise to their expectations. And that also frees the kids from trying to figure out where the boundaries are. The kids can concentrate on their education, because they don't have to worry about, 'If I do this or that, am I going to get in trouble?" I've actually had my kids worry about walking down the hall, because they don't know the rules...and yet, they wouldn't break a rule if they knew it, but they don't know it...[T]hat issue follows them around like a black cloud" (C 191-196 B).

Other parents, remarking about exceptional principals they had known, referred to their visibility, both on the campus and in community settings. Typical remarks include:

"That principal, first of all, loved kids. S/he knew every kid by name!" (C 123-124 A).
"This particular principal goes out of his/her way to make people feel comfortable and welcome"
(C 286 B).

"[That] principal doesn't know Spanish, and I don't know English, but in his/her eyes I can see what's said. S/he is very devoted to his/her work...the kind of person that stands at the door watching the children and visiting the cafeteria, talking to the children" (C 420-424 C).

These parents believe that principals have a tremendous effect upon the school. The cheerfulness and optimism of these administrators positively infect all of the people they interact with, particularly teachers and students.

"Don't you think that your kids feel it, when they know that certain teachers don't get along with the principal...rather than they're working all together?" (C 164-165 B).
"They [good principals] think there is this wonderful power that is coming up through the next generation!" (C 292 B).

Parents are adamant that, above all, principals love children. Students must know that their principals care for them, and love must emanate, even when principals' energy is depleted by the demands of their work. Parents recognize the immense difficulty of the work administrators do, as evidenced by their comments

about the multi-task orientation of a principal's day, long and exhausting hours, the threat of lawsuits, a central office which is, at times, perceived as unsupportive, and dealing with gang members, troublesome teachers, and uncooperative parents Several parents remarked that they worry about school principals, because of the immense demands placed upon them, yet they insist that their administrators "like kids" and "like parents, too." The importance of the love of children and the joy of interacting with people was evident throughout the focus group sessions. Parents consistently remarked that children must perceive love coming through administrators and also teachers. Above all, they want their children to learn in a environment which respects them and protects them, not just physically, but also emotionally.

> "A principal should have lots of love, and unity with the teachers...[Y]ou can see the look in their eyes...it reflects. Are they there [to] love the kids or because they are just earning [money]?" (C 353-357 C).
>
> "I want someone who considers students and their welfare as number one" (C 154 B).
>
> "[I want a principal who has] understanding and compassion...[who will] be kind to students...sensitive to the students' needs and take care of all of them [with the same level of care]" (C 5; 19; 21-22 A).

Parents praised those educators they've encountered who exhibit these qualities and expressed frustration with those who were lacking them. One parent, a nurse, remarked that she would be fired if she treated her clients the way she has been treated at one school. All the parents expressed both unpleasant and delightful school experiences, angry with the first and extremely pleased and appreciative of the second.

As these parents related their stories--dismay, hope, frustration, joy, excitement, anger, appreciation--these emotions surfaced again and again

throughout the process. It is extremely important that school administrators never neglect the human side of education as political pressures force them "under the gun" to address the technical component of successful academic achievement.

Leadership

Leadership issues arose as the second most discussed topic over the course of the three focus group sessions. Two concepts, strength and "building people," emerged from the discussion and were most clearly articulated by the westside and northeast groups. The low socioeconomic, Spanish-speaking parents at the southside school also added to the richness of data collected for this domain, although their perspective was focused differently.

Parents want principals who see their mission as "building people." They want leaders who will recognize the talent in those around them, develop that talent, and draw people into the organizational sphere. Leaders who initiate input from others and who build democratic processes in schools are valued by parents. Parents spoke of "building people" in reference to teachers, to students, and to themselves--in the form of motivating and drawing upon their strengths.

> "I also think that a principal is a person who wears many hats. They are so busy...that they need to learn to use their faculty to the ultimate. There is so much talent sitting on campuses. They need to use it and not let it be wasted" (l 259-261 B).
>
> "[A principal] is a person that motivates a lot!...that wins over all the world...that motivates [by saying], 'My son, you can, you can, you can!" (L 354-355; 357 C).
>
> "[O]ne of the most important things principals need to be taught is to seek for rehabilitation [of students] and not punishment, and to look at a child as--there is always potential to recover. No child in a public school should be beyond hope...If administrators [look] for positive things, they [would] focus less on punishment. What other things can we offer that will be a positive force in their [students'] lives?" (L 241-243; 255-257 B).
>
> "As a parent, I am frustrated when I offer to help, and in no way was I ever asked to help. And yet they [the school] needed our help, because things fall through the cracks. And yet, you're sitting there, as a parent, with absolutely no sympathy whatsoever for their problem, the school's problem, because you've offered, and you're thinking, 'Well, you didn't take us up on our offer. We

could have handled this for you...we could have made this a good experience for our students. And we were frustrated because it was not a positive experience for our students, because you, as teacher, as administrator, as student activities manager, did not take us up on our offer' " (L 180-187 B).

Parents see strong leaders as those who are not afraid to tell others they need and want help. In no way did they interpret a call for help as a sign of weakness, but rather, they viewed this characteristic as a strength.

"[I]t's a cornerstone of leadership to be unpretentious, to be able to surrender yourself and show them that 'I'm human'"(L 56-57 A).

Parents want strong leaders for their children's schools. They dislike "wishy-washy" decision-making and are frustrated with the lack of a stance. They want leaders who will stand up for what is right, be willing to take "the flak", and be a "pillar of strength" for their school community, such that their children can use them as role models.

"[Don't] blunder by making wishy-washy decisions. I mean, that's a sign of strength (the avoidance of wishy-washy decisions). And if I were a [marginal] teacher who knew just how to work the system, I might step back a little if I thought that the principal [was strong]...it's the confidence that the principal needs to have. Some have it and some don't" (L 103-106 B).

"I don't want a fence-sitter, in either a teacher or an administrator...I want an administrator who has the moral courage to say, 'This is the way we're going to do it, day after day, this is what is expected,' and the kids know, and the teachers know" (L 151; 155-156 B).

"I think a principal has to have a little bit of moxy and guts. You know, the ivory tower [central office] isn't always right--in fact, it's rarely right, and it's up to the principal to challenge it" (L 18-19 A).

"They [the kids] have to know that they can go to you [principal] for help. At [one event I attended at another school], that school was basically leaderless, even though they [administrators] were there. Whereas, I know that if I went to a certain principal, that would be taken care of, and I could depend on an authority figure" (L 212-214 B).

"I think they [principals] need to have the strength of character to address issues, and not ignore them. [I think] fear of retaliation [is why some principals don't deal with difficult situations]. Lawsuits are very, very frightening, I think, to administrators. The buck really does stop there. And I think they're worried about the ramifications. I think everybody, though, appreciates a stronger stand rather than a weaker stand" (L 84-85; 91-94 B).

"Principals [should] be something positive for our children, because it is the children they are educating--the future of tomorrow, the men of tomorrow. [The children should have the] image of their teachers for [an] example" (L 367-372 C).

Some parents expressed a concern that schools are losing good teachers when principals lack strength in their exercise of leadership. Others voiced concern that principals are required to do so much that they can't really be the visible leaders parents want them to be. As a possible solution to this quandary, some suggested that school leaders learn from business CEOs how to manage their time and macro-manage their schools, rather than "burning out" by attempting to "micro-manage"--and not doing that very well.

> "You know, some of the quality staff that exists at campuses, if you don't have a good principal, we talk about that talent hemorrhaging. It's running off of that campus to get down to central office or someplace else away from the classroom--not because they have a fear of doing a good job, but because the principal doesn't have the characteristics we're talking about. And I think we're losing a lot of good teachers" (L 65-69 A).

Communication

Communication skills were the third most talked about topic throughout the course of the focus group discussions. Parents feel that many of the problems which occur on campuses take place because of miscommunications and misconceptions. It is essential that principals be good communicators--orally and in written work. However, being a skilled communicator goes beyond the technical competencies associated with good writing and effective speaking. Parents repeatedly spoke of administrators who would listen, truly listen, to their children and also to the parents themselves. The Hispanic parents focused more on the listening--which depicts caring--than any other part of the communication arena.

El Paso is culturally and linguistically different from many Texas cities, and thus parents were asked whether or not Spanish should be required for principals

in this region. Most felt that bilingualism would be helpful, but should not be a requirement, as this could preclude good leaders from entering the pool of potential administrators. The Spanish-speaking, Hispanic parents at the southside school were most emphatic about the language issue, but with an interesting twist. Whereas the westside and northeast school suggested Spanish as a helpful skill, the southside parents said they were far more interested in principals who would love their children and care for them. They indicated that they are accustomed to working through translators and that their interest in communicative ability did not rest with Spanish proficiency.

Other parents spoke of bridge-building and 'tearing down fences.' One father in particular pointed out that principals ought to be encouraged to be more open to parental input. This father takes it upon himself to introduce himself to school administrators and to make himself available to the campus. He calls it a "dual responsibility"--the school reaching out to the parents and parents reaching out to the school. Another father praised a favorite principal, now deceased, for his interest and interaction with the community. His name was associated with one particular high school because of the bridges he built with people and the communication he developed with all stakeholders involved with his school.

Parents also discussed the absolute necessity that principals return parental phone calls. One woman pointed out that most parents have very little contact with principals, and most likely will only deal with them a few times throughout their child's school career. It is therefore imperative that principals respond to those

parents in order to maintain positive impressions.

> "The only time I would ever call the principal would be usually over a problem, unfortunately, and [if] I do not get a quick response...that's the most important thing in my day. What happens to my child or what I'm concerned about as a parent is absolutely at the top of the list. It can't be to that principal, but most parents don't see that. So we're back to those interpersonal communication skills again. Getting back to that parent personally. I was with a principal recently who was new to me. And even though I knew he had a list ten miles long, I got the impression that the most important thing that he really had to do was sit there and listen to the little PTA lady. And I appreciated that...and I haven't forgotten it. So that impression was great!" (CM 149-156 B).

Another mother expressed great frustration when a principal refused to meet with her, her son, and the child's teacher. She had tried repeatedly to get a group conference, but was refused. She was not satisfied with the refusal, and yet her ability to "work the system" was lacking. As a result, she remained in a state of dissatisfaction and her demeanor throughout the discussion reflected her displeasure, although she made an effort to contribute additional remarks to the focus group session. The parent quoted above said it well, "What happens to my child, or what I'm concerned about as a parent is absolutely at the top of the list." It is extremely unfortunate--even immoral and unprofessional on the part of educators--when low socioeconomic parents' needs are ignored--when it is most obvious the parent could have avoided that experience had she been more knowledgeable working the school's system.

Research confirms that children from low socioeconomic homes perform far better when their affective needs are met by educators. Payne (1995), the author of *A Framework: Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty*, notes that the majority of poor students who successfully make it into the middle class do so as the result of a positive relationship--a teacher,

counselor, or coach who takes an interest in them as an individual. The low socioeconomic, Hispanic parents who repeatedly stated that they want educators to listen to their children, to care for their children, and to love their children, confirm this research.

The communication domain also specifies that principals be skillful communicating with the media. The reaction of parents to this standard was uniform: laughter and an almost hopeless throwing up of the hands. The first words from parents were, "Well, if we could train the media to be fair..." Others noted that dealing with the media is not something a principal wants to learn by trial and error, but they were at a loss as to how this skill could be taught to future administrators. All the parental groups, regardless of socioeconomic status and ethnicity/language, expressed fairly identical views regarding this topic.

> "The College of Education can train principals and teachers what to say, but the problem is with the media. No matter what the principal says, they [the media] are going to change what he or she says, so it will be "newsworthy" for the newspaper or the six o'clock news. It's not a matter of what the principal or teachers say, but what the media does to it" (CM 220-223 B).
>
> "EVERYBODY in leadership ought to be trained to interact with the media. Until you've done it, until you've been there and realized that someone is trying to manipulate the conversation...principals are having to handle situations all the time, and they must be trained...so they can protect their bosses and protect the school district" (CM 58-61 A).

It is apparent that parents recognize the need for media training, yet because of their distrust for the media, they are skeptical that instruction will positively improve the situation.

Equity

When the equity domain was discussed, parents responded in ways that again pointed out the need for sensitivity and caring attitudes. For a region as poor

as El Paso, it was curious that not once did any parent discuss the equitable distribution of resources within the school district. Concerns were associated with relationships--between students, with faculty, and administrators to students and parents.

Several parents mentioned that there are students who are not taught to respect other cultures and ethnic groups at home. They then bring these attitudes with them to school, a problem principals cannot prevent. However, at school they can be instructed to develop sensitivity or tolerance--and administrators must be savvy enough to attempt to soothe racial tensions at school.

"I graduated from [high] school five years ago, and even then...I come from a mixed race heritage...I saw first hand students calling other students names. They used racial slurs...whatever ethnic group they belonged to...that's the first thing that came out of some peoples' mouths when they were angry at someone else. And I think it shouldn't be the main point for a principal to focus on, but I think that when there is a problem, the principal needs to be sensitive enough and understanding enough to see where the anger is coming from, where the slurs are coming from, and where they're going, and figure out a way to solve it. They've got to understand it" (E 16-22 A).

Some of the low socioeconomic, Spanish-speaking parents feel their children have been stereotyped by administrators and teachers. They believe their children have been stigmatized and accused wrongly of things they did not do, simply because of their appearance. They want teachers and principals to learn about other cultures, understand differences, and avoid stereotyping children.

Parents from the southside school told stories of their children being humiliated in class, stories not related by the other two groups of parents. It could be that the westside and northeast parents chose not to reveal these personal testimonies, but it is more likely that their children have not suffered such chastening to the same extent as the southside children. Although it should not

occur, it is well known in educational circles that poor children are chastised and told they will not succeed far more often than more affluent children.

> "I had an experience with my son, the only son I have. When he started pre-kinder, he had been in school for about one month when the principal called me at home and told me my son was very immature. He said, 'We don't want him in the school. Come for him.' At that time, things were left at that. I went and asked why I couldn't get them to change their minds, or change him to another teacher. I didn't want to, but I took him home with me. Later in time, I learned that the problem was he had had an accident in class. He went 'peepee' and the teachers were very mad. That's why they didn't want him, but it wasn't because the child didn't warn them. He did warn them, but they didn't listen! And for this simple problem, a school year was lost!" (E 122-133 C).

Another southside parent described how her child, a very serious but intelligent child, was scolded the first day of school and told he was going to "flunk" the year. She depicted his shame and fear, and how she intervened with the teacher, explaining that the child was simply a very quiet child. The situation was corrected, and her son did well--but it is an all too common story told by parents of poor, minority children. This woman's concern that expectations were less for her child than they should have been was echoed by an Anglo parent who remarked,

> "[Academic] expectations must be the same. To expect anything less of a child who is Anglo, or Hispanic, or black, or Vietnamese is inappropriate because children and people learn expectations and conform to expectations. If the expectations are low, that's how the kids will be. If we start calling attention to ethnicity, then that's where the expectations will be. We need to be tolerant of varied backgrounds, but not be so aware of it that we look for expected behaviors" (E 34-40 A).

From the eyes of parents, the concerns with equity seem to focus on relationships and caring behavior from educators toward their children. Low socioeconomic, minority parents want their children to be given the same opportunities for academic success that other parents want, and are quite upset when their children are not treated well. More affluent parents, of course, find the

same things disturbing, but they are knowledgeable of how to "work the system" so that such occurrences are far less frequent than those experienced by poor, minority children

Professional Development

Parents didn't have much to say about professional development other than they believe all principals should take continuing education on a regular basis. With changes coming down from the Texas Education Agency (for example, the increased number of credits for high school graduation), UIL (University Interscholastic League) modifications, variations for eligibility to colleges, new methods for teaching children continually emerging, and changing federal mandates for special education--professional development should not be an option. Parents compared other professions to education, noting that many professions require continuing schooling--so why should principals be exempt?

> "After I graduated from high school, I went to beauty school. Every year we have to take more classes...I think that the life of a young person is far more important than a good haircut!" (PD 8-11 A)
>
> "My last point is that teachers and administrators should never surrender their student ID card. The second you surrender your student ID card and say, 'I've learned all I'm going to learn...I have arrived,' you are in trouble. We've got to keep learning" (PD 14-16 A).

The Hispanic parents emphasized the need for educators to continually gain knowledge about how children learn, what makes them "tick," and how they can better understand different cultures. They emphasized the need for principals to avoid stagnation and to strive for self-actualization. They believe it is possible and very desirable for administrators to continually improve their practice, so that errors committed in the past are not repeated.

Curriculum & Instruction

Parents had little to say about curriculum and instruction. They value good teaching and appreciate good teachers. Several remarked that the principal should be the instructional leader of the school, that s/he should be capable of walking into a teacher's classroom and teaching the lesson, if necessary. Parents want principals who get out of their offices and into classrooms. It seems that their concerns resonate more toward the climate, leadership, and communication issues--provided teaching is taking place and children are learning.

Limitations

One should be cautious about generalizing these findings to populations beyond the El Paso area. More work needs to be done to determine if, indeed, the concerns and emphases of these parents simulate those of parents in other cities farther from the U.S.-Mexico border. However, the results from the triangulated parental groups were consistent enough that this researcher believes them valid for the region served by the masters degree/certification program at the University of Texas at El Paso's department of Educational Leadership and Foundations.

One component not addressed in this study is the problem of how principals should handle unreasonable parents once they do open the doors and invite them to participate in governance and leadership. Before principals solicit parents to take part in the larger, more meaningful school reform process, they must be somewhat assured that they're not adding an additional "headache," not worth their time and effort. It is critical that clearly articulated benefits for both

parents and school administrators be evident in these new partnerships. The parental engagement piece must be carefully thought through, communication must occur in both directions, and respect for one another's concerns and ideas must be well established.

The parental piece is but one component, though, of the multifaceted stakeholder analysis which should be researched to inform program redesign. School boards, businessmen and women, community members, students, teachers, and practicing administrators should also provide input into the program's development. By viewing the problem through multiple lenses, the university is more likely to develop a program which truly prepares administrators in the best manner possible.

Conclusion.

Over the last decade schools have been accused of harboring intellectual softness, maintaining dysfunctional organizational structures and unprofessional work conditions, lacking expectations and standards, avoiding meaningful accountability systems, and making excuses for inadequate leadership (Murphy, 1992). The reform measures of the early 1980s focused on the "quick fix" through top-down mandates. However, the top-down measures which work well in highly structured organizations, with clear-cut goals and objectives, fail miserably when applied to loosely coupled organizations, of which schools are an example. When organizations are characterized by "messiness," complexity, and serving a multitude of constituencies, the technical approach employed by most managers is

woefully insufficient.

This study confirms the notion that parents want to participate in the democratic revitalization of our society through interaction with school leaders. They are interested in developing and supporting principals, with the ultimate aim of creating more vibrant and exciting schools for their children. It is a mistake for educators to lump parents into the category of "those people who just cause problems and make my life more difficult." School reform cannot take place in a political vacuum (Shirley, 1997). Americans have always believed that education is too important to relegate to a cadre of "experts." They have consistently embraced the concept of the "aroused citizenry" which can powerfully influence public policy (Bierlein, 1993). Educators need to appreciate parents as a valuable resource--and, if skillfully cultivated--their talents and energy can help transform American public schools.

We need leaders who are willing to reallocate power and authority among various stakeholders, with the belief that when power is in the right hands, school improvement will occur (Murphy, 1992). Successful change in schools depends partly on empowering parents, and providing parents a voice is but one step in the right direction toward establishing new and rewarding relationships between schools and their constituents (1992). As we press toward energizing school reform, we must embrace the truth that schools need leaders, men and women "who are artists as well as analysts, who can reframe experience to discover new issues and possibilities. We need managers who love their work, their

organizations, and the people whose lives they affect. We need leaders and managers who appreciate management as a moral and ethical undertaking. We need leaders who combine hardheaded realism with passionate commitment to larger values and purposes" (Bolman & Deal, 1997). We must go beyond the training of principals for technical competence, and prepare them for leadership--leadership which communicates vision and empowers others (Bennis, 1990) to participate in the building of our most precious institution, the nation's public schools.

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Appendix

Focus Group Interview Guide

Note: These questions are intended as prompts to initiate discussion within each of the domains. The domains are taken from the six Learner-Centered Proficiencies for school administrators, adopted by the Texas State Board of Education in 1994.

Domain 1
Leadership--while maintaining professional ethics and personal integrity.

- As a parent, what do you think are the most important characteristics/skills a school administrator must have?

- When you hear about schools, either positive things or negative things, what thoughts go through your mind? Let's discuss the positive things first--then the negative things.

Domain 2
Climate--mutual trust and respect. (Note: The questions in the "Communication" proficiency overlap with this domain).

- Reflect back to times when you have visited various campuses. Tell me about your experiences.

Domain 3
Curriculum and Instruction--sound curriculum and appropriate instructional strategies.

- Think about an excellent principal you know. Describe what kind of teacher you think s/he was before becoming a principal.

- How important is it that the principal be an excellent teacher?--or is it more important to be an excellent manager?

Domain 4
Equity--respecting and responding to diversity; building on shared values.

- Everyone at the university is concerned with preparing principals to deal with diversity. How important is it to you that a principal be a member of a particular ethnic group--or is it more critical that the principal be sensitive to varied ethnic groups?

Domain 5
Communication--effectively communicates with staff, students, parents, community members, and media.

- To what extent do you think principals should be trained in public relations in order to deal effectively with the media?

- Are there additional kinds of training principals need so that they can communicate effectively with other groups?

Domain 6
Professional Development--personal growth plan; professional development of all staff.

- Some principals are new, others have been on the job for ten to fifteen years. From your perspective, how important is it that those who have been there a long time get continual training?

- If the university were to design this continuing training, what might that look like?--for those who are relatively new?--for those who've been doing the job for many years?